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# Gifts and Social Relations

## *The Mechanisms of Reciprocity*

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**abstract:** In the modern gift literature an anti-utilitarian and a utilitarian view on the gift can be distinguished. From the anti-utilitarian perspective, the freedom of the gift is seen as one of its main characteristics, while the idea that gifts are caught in a cycle of reciprocity is downplayed. In the utilitarian approach, assumptions about rational actors weighing their preferences according to some utility are predominant. In the first approach, reciprocity is seen as undermining 'genuine' gifts. The utilitarian approach does take reciprocity into account but fails to analyse why the principle of reciprocity is so effective. This article attempts to provide such an explanation. By illuminating both the variety of the forms of the gift and the universality of the underlying principle, it is argued that gifts reflect a multi-purpose symbolic 'utility' that transcends both utilitarianism and anti-utilitarianism.

**keywords:** gift-giving ♦ gifts ♦ reciprocity ♦ ritual ♦ social relations ♦ (anti-)utilitarianism

## Introduction

Goods are not merely exchanged for some economic profit but they are also, in the words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'vehicles and instruments for realities of another order: influence, power, sympathy, status, emotion; and the skilful game of exchange consists of a complex totality of maneuvers, conscious or unconscious, in order to gain security and to fortify one's self against risks incurred through alliances and rivalry' (Lévi-Strauss, 1996: 19). This often quoted passage is a beautiful illustration, not only of the complexity of the meanings and functions of gift exchange but also of the fact that it has survival value: it fulfils a stabilizing function in the always unpredictable and in principle insecure interaction with other human beings.

Gift exchange has a variety of functions, for instance, economic, social, moral, religious, aesthetic and juridical ones, which is why Marcel Mauss

called it a 'total social phenomenon' in his famous 1923 essay on the gift (Mauss, 1990). In addition to being the expression of love, friendship or respect, gifts can be used for less noble purposes such as to manipulate, flatter, bribe, deceive, humiliate, dominate, offend, hurt and even kill, as in the case of the poisoned cup. That a gift can be meant to kill is most clearly illustrated in the double meaning of the German (and Dutch) word *Gift*, which also means poison. Gift exchange can sustain communities of any kind, from a group of normal, law-abiding citizens to a community of scoundrels. In 1908, Georg Simmel wrote that feelings of faithfulness and gratitude develop in any kind of group that has a certain duration, irrespective of its initially connecting motives (Simmel, 1950). Mutual loyalty, often supported by gifts, connects those involved in collective hostilities towards third parties as well as those who maintain collective friendships.

Although one of the primary functions of the gift is to create and maintain social ties, gifts can also undermine and even annihilate human bonds. By excessive gift-giving, Shakespeare's eponymous protagonist in *Timon of Athens* tried to buy himself friendship, with the result that all of his former friends turned against him. In the end, the opposite effect was achieved, and Timon was left behind in bitter loneliness (Schrover, 1997).

In this article, I take a stance against two influential contemporary views of the gift: on the one hand, the anti-utilitarian perspective of the gift that emphasizes its potential to overcome a too economized view of society, and on the other hand, the utilitarian approach that focuses on the instrumental rationality of gift-giving practices. My own position is that human gift-giving is too layered and too complex to be incarcerated in such a one-dimensional perspective. By illuminating both the variety of the forms of the gift, and the universality of the underlying principle, I hope to demonstrate that the gift reflects a multi-purpose symbolic 'utility' that transcends both utilitarianism and anti-utilitarianism.

## The Object

Virtually anything can be given as a gift: objects used for amusement or distraction such as books, CDs, DVDs, plants, flowers, objects of art, jewellery, food products, animals, token-gifts, coupons or money. In fact, any object can come to symbolize an existing or a desired tie to somebody else, and thereby become a gift: the small shell found on the beach during a walk with a lover, a tiny flower freshly picked or a beautiful stone found in the mountains. Another interesting category of gifts consists of parts of the human body such as organs or blood (Titmuss, 1970). Throughout the centuries, people in the most different cultures have sacrificed to gods or ancestors (Berking, 1999). Not only animals but occasionally also human beings were involved in ritual slaughter (Komter,

2005). Turning to non-western cultures, the picture is as varied as it is in western countries. In his description of the *Kula* ceremonial, the ritual gift exchange among the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski (1922) mentions not only the well-known arm-shells and necklaces but also, for instance, piglets, fruits, yams (sweet potatoes), raw food, cooked food, stone axes, whalebone spoons, betel-nut and tobacco, each gift belonging to a particular type of occasion and a specific type of relationship.

Gifts can also be non-material. To stay with the Trobrianders: material gifts were exchanged for non-material possessions such as the knowledge of magic, or the title to a garden plot. A man could wish to acquire the privileges due to him by inheritance from a maternal uncle or elder brother before this person's death. Yet another non-material gift is the privilege to execute a dance. Dances were 'owned' among the Trobrianders; this means that the original inventor had the right of 'producing' his dance and song in his village community. Malinowski describes the transaction as follows: 'If another village takes a fancy to this song and dance, it has to purchase the right to perform it. This is done by handing ceremonially to the original village a substantial payment of food and valuables, after which the dance is taught to the new possessors' (Malinowski, 1922: 186). Malinowski emphasizes that it is impossible to draw a fixed line between trade on the one hand, and the exchange of gifts on the other. His catalogue of gifts indeed ranges from the 'pure gift', given without any expectations of returns, to forms of pure barter.

In our own culture, we are familiar with non-material gifts such as hospitality and forms of help or care given disinterestedly. In the ancient virtue of hospitality, caring for the needs of the stranger was considered an inevitable obligation towards a fellow human being: there was a 'general human obligation to hospitality' (Finley, 1988). The Bible ordains hospitality to strangers as a holy plight. In Homer's *Odyssey* the rule of hospitality was to welcome a guest in your home, offer him food and shelter, and only afterwards ask questions about his person and mission. The original meaning of hospitality is based on reciprocity and mutual exchange: just as strangers may need you, you might need them at some future time, and therefore you should offer them hospitality (Herzfeld, 1987; Pitt-Rivers, 1968). The ritual of hospitality, the sharing of bread and other food, is a prototypical example of the morality of reciprocity. This applies not only to human beings but also to higher primates, as Frans de Waal (1996) has demonstrated in his fascinating study among chimpanzees.

## The Occasion

Occasions for gift-giving are almost as numerous as there are objects to give; moreover, they vary between cultures. In our western culture, we are familiar

with gifts given at weddings, births, funerals, birthday parties, Christmas, Santa Claus, Valentine's Day, Mother's and Father's Day, exams, promotions, jubilees, moving house, welcoming or farewell parties. We give when we are invited to dine with other people, or when we visit an ill friend, we give to beggars, to the church, to charity. Among the Trobriand people, the variety of gift occasions is impressive as well. Malinowski mentions a range of different types of gifts given at different occasions. Each gift occasion has its own name. *Kula* gifts are not merely objects, but signs of wealth and power. They possess an individuality, expressed in a personal name and a personal history connected to them. Before being offered they are placed on display. As they circulate around the big ring of the islands, they acquire fame and become renowned among the general public, creating a sensation when they appear in a given district. Basically, the *Kula* exchange has always to be a gift followed by a counter-gift. The principle of give-and-take, or reciprocity, is the fundamental rule underlying the ceremony. The exchange is opened by an initial, or opening gift, and closed by a final, or return present. In the cycle of gift exchange sometimes intermediary gifts are given, tokens of good faith indicating that the main gift will be returned on a future occasion. Some articles are particularly liked and desired. In order to compete for the favour of receiving such a gift, sometimes so-called solicitory gifts are given, gifts expressing the wish to receive a specific type of gift in return. Another well-known category of solicitory gifts are those offered to the gods and the spirits (Mauss, 1990).

## The Ritual

Gifts are symbolically defined as gifts by being wrapped (at least in our western culture; the Trobriand people do not have this custom). Most gifts, even those that are unusually large or oddly shaped, are wrapped. If a gift is not wrapped, for instance a money gift, its appearance is often altered, for example by inserting it in a self-made picture or work of art. The important thing is that the gift looks different before and after it has been given away. People often spend a lot of time and care to selecting and preparing the wrapping, even though they know that the wrapping will be torn apart and discarded immediately after the gift has been given. In Japan, wrapping is a real art in itself. Hendry (1995) describes how various types of extremely refined wrapping belong to various occasions for gift-giving. For instance, a wrapping with an inextricable knot is used for a wedding gift, whereas condolence gifts are adorned with a lotus motif. Japanese shops sell ready-made wrappings for various occasions. There are, for instance, special envelopes for wrapping money and for New Year presents. In Japan, the function of wrapping is to refine the object and to add layers of meaning to the gift in its unwrapped form.

The wrapping emphasizes that it is not the object itself but the act of giving a gift that matters (Cheal, 1988). In Japan, there is a related custom that supports this interpretation. In that country the immediate opening of a gift is considered impolite because it is assumed to display too much interest in the material content of the gift instead of in the sentiment it expresses (Hendry, 1995). It will be clear that a lack of awareness of the cultural differences in the language of gift exchange and wrapping traditions can lead to possible disasters and even the breakdown of relations.

Yet another ritual aspect of gift-giving is the way gifts are presented and received. Among the Trobriand people, the etiquette of the exchange 'requires that the gift should be given in an off-hand, abrupt and almost angry manner, and received with equivalent nonchalance and disdain' (Malinowski, 1922: 352). Malinowski's explanation for the part played by the receiver is that he will always insist on the magnitude and the value of the gift he gave himself, and minimize those of the gifts received. Moreover, the receiver will be reluctant to appear in want of anything. Both these motives combine to produce an attitude of disdain at the reception of a gift. The angry attitude of the giver might, according to Malinowski, be an expression of the natural human dislike of having to part with a possession. In addition, by showing what a wrench it is to give it away, the giver can enhance the apparent value of the gift.

The ritual of the potlatch, a ceremony of competitive gift-giving and collective destruction of wealth, is another illustration of the variety of gift-giving. Mauss has described the potlatch among the Indian societies of the American Northwest. The system of gift exchange among these people is characterized by violence, exaggeration and antagonism. The notion of honour plays a central role. The individual prestige of a chief and that of his clan is closely linked to what is given. In certain kinds of potlatch, one must expend all that one has and keep nothing back. The potlatch is a competition to see who is the richest and the most madly extravagant. In some cases, gifts are not given and returned but destroyed: 'so as not to give the slightest hint of desiring your gift to be reciprocated. Whole boxes of olachen (candlefish) oil or whale oil are burnt, as are houses and thousands of blankets. The most valuable copper objects are broken and thrown into the water, in order to put down and to "flatten" one's rival' (Mauss, 1990: 37) Here, gift-giving is clearly a means to acquire and maintain power and social status.

## **The Relationship**

According to Fiske (1991), there are four basic types of human relationships. Human activities as diverse as arranging a marriage, performing religious rituals, making choices, judging what is morally good or wrong, or dealing

with things or gifts, can be ordered into four fundamental models: 'community sharing', 'authority ranking', 'equality matching' and 'market pricing'.

In 'community sharing', things are mainly exchanged on the basis of feelings of connectedness to other people. What one gives is not dependent on what one has received, but springs from one's perception of other people's needs. In this model, the things given will often be food, care or services. Another category of giving within this model is based on identification with other people. An important characteristic of this type of gifts is their sentimental value. One may think of heirlooms, keepsakes and any other objects that symbolize precious memories. In all these examples, gifts are markers of 'community'.

Within the 'authority ranking' model, exchange is motivated by a (conscious or unconscious) desire to emphasize one's own status or power position. Power, fame, prestige and merit are regarded as the most relevant criteria within social relationships. Valuable things are transacted with those high in the power hierarchy, whereas sops are good enough for those in lower positions. In contrast to the community model, the authority ranking model promotes also showing and exposing valuable objects, in addition to transacting or giving such items to other people. Examples are conspicuous consumption, exhibiting prestige items or symbols of rank and status. In this model, gifts are markers of superiority in power relations.

In 'equality matching', people have reciprocal exchange patterns, in which quid pro quo, or tit-for-tat, is the prevailing motivation. Considerations in exchange are influenced neither by need nor by merit, status or power. The items exchanged can often be aligned, weighted or otherwise compared, enabling the participants to achieve equality by concrete operations of matching. Gifts exchanged in equality matching relationships are tokens of balance.

In 'market pricing', people's main preoccupation in exchange is: do I benefit from the transaction, do the costs involved outweigh the profits? People's relationships to others are instrumental, and often characterized by competition and struggle. One gives to those from whom one may expect some direct or future benefit. Gifts are tokens of utility or material (economic) value. How do these relational models affect the motives to give, or in other words, the spirit of the gift?

## **The Spirit**

Like in the archaic societies described by anthropologists, it is also, to use Mauss's term, the spirit of the gift that counts in contemporary western society, and not so much the content. What motives are involved in gift-giving in western societies?



A first category of motives expresses friendship, love, gratitude, respect, loyalty or solidarity. These gifts have as their main purpose to communicate our positive feelings to the recipient. Some of the motives reported by the respondents of a Dutch study on gift-giving (Komter, 1996a, 1996b; Komter and Schuyt, 1993) are strongly other-directed and altruistic: one wants to contribute to another person's well-being without thinking about a return service; one helps or cares because one feels a general moral obligation to do so. However, even such gifts may (consciously or unconsciously) have a strategic aim. For instance, gifts may express our desire to forgive, to repair for something done wrong in the past, to ease our conscience, to flatter, to attract attention or to prevent our being forgotten. Giving to charity is another example of benefiting another person while at the same time relieving our own conscience.

A very common class of motives relates to insecurity, for instance about the status of the relationship. As Caplow (1982) argued, the majority of gifts are given in order to ascertain and fortify relationships that are deemed important but have not yet been stabilized. In the same vein, religious offerings may be regarded as attempts to reduce insecurity. By means of offerings, humans express their gratitude towards the deity, thereby reducing their insecurity about the hereafter and increasing their hopes to obtain grace. In general, both gifts based on motives such as love, respect, gratitude and those springing from insecurity fit into the first model, described by Fiske (1991): 'community'.

A second class of motives is based on a need for power and prestige, or inspired by considerations related to reputation and fame. The resources the giver and the receiver can dispose of may be very unequally distributed, giving one party the right to be predominantly in the receiving position whereas the other party is, or feels obliged to be, mainly in the role of giver (Gouldner, 1973). By means of abundant gift-giving we are putting ourselves in a morally superior position, and we may cause the recipient to feel indebted. Gift-giving as a sign of power is not restricted to the potlatch but is also a common practice in western society: offering exquisite banquets, giving expensive bouquets of flowers or organizing fancy parties – these are all modern examples of potlatch where the recipient is, as it were, stunned by the gift. Giving gifts may serve to dominate, humiliate and to make others dependent upon our benevolence and our willingness to share valuables and resources with them.

A related set of motives is inspired by hostility, hate or contempt. Gift-giving can be a conscious or unconscious act of unfriendliness. We may give a gift to someone who has affronted us or treated us badly, in order to let this person sense how ignominious his or her action has been. Aggression can be the underlying motive of a meagre gift given to somebody whom we used to bestow with abundant gifts in the past. Excessive

giving to a person of whom one is intensely jealous and whom one deeply hates for that reason is another example of (disguised) aggression as a motive to give (A. Freud, 1986). Both the gifts motivated by power and those inspired by hostility would fit into Fiske's relational model of 'authority ranking'.

A third, and large category of motives is related to psychological expectations of reciprocity and equality. The underlying idea is that favours have to be reciprocated with the equivalence: I will give you something, because I expect that you will return my gift in due time or when necessary (for instance in the case of help). Empirical research in the Netherlands shows that most of the motives reported by our respondents are of this type (Komter, 1996b). There is a propensity to give, but before doing so an inner calculus is made about the respective participants' position on the 'debt-balance' (Schwartz, 1996). Feelings of being morally obliged to return a gift, and not purely altruistic motives are the main psychological impetus to reciprocal giving. Here we have the class of motives corresponding with Fiske's model of 'equality'.

A fourth class of motives is based on implicit or explicit self-interest. Such gifts can be given with the purpose to manipulate, corrupt, blackmail or bribe. Many gifts in the sphere of public life are hardly covering up the self-interest that motivated them, for instance, the pharmaceutical industry offering golf weekends to GPs and their partners, concluded by a light scientific programme on the advantages of certain pharmaceutical products. Particularly, the larger business gifts are on the brink of bribe. Money gifts may be used for all kinds of dubitable aims: as hush or redemption money, or as a means to obtain certain societal or political gains. Fiske's relational model of the 'market' covers the motives of gifts given in this spirit.

## **The Principle**

In the modern gift literature two ways of looking at the gift can be distinguished: an anti-utilitarian and a utilitarian view. Caillé (2000), founder of *La Revue du MAUSS* (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste en Sciences Sociales), is a representative of the first approach. He objects to an overly economized view of society, encountered in certain branches of social science such as rational choice theory, and emphasizes the theoretical potential of the gift to serve as a paradigm for a critical understanding of contemporary society. In a similar vein, Godbout (1992) emphasizes how important aspects of human relationships such as forgiveness, love, respect, dignity, compassion are fostered by the gift. Calculation and reciprocity are not central to the gift, according to him. From the anti-utilitarian perspective, the freedom of the gift is seen as one of its main characteristics, whereas the idea that gifts are fundamentally caught in a cycle of reciprocity, as had so convincingly been argued by Mauss,

is played down. Similarly, in some deconstructionist approaches to the gift, attempts at recompense or reciprocity are seen as destroying the possibility of a 'genuine gift' (Derrida, 1991); implicit is the idea that real gifts are truly altruistic and are, or should be, 'unspoiled' by expectations or acts of reciprocity. Finally, Alan Schrift, in his collection of classical and modern essays on the gift, argues that 'a narrowly self-interested notion of reciprocal return' (Schrift, 1997: 19) has come to dominate the current discourse on giving, and advocates viewing the gift as a potential ethic of generosity.

In the 'utilitarian' approach, assumptions of rational actors weighing their preferences according to some utility are predominant. In this mainly economical tradition, researchers attempt to unravel the enigmas with which the phenomenon of gift-giving is confronting them: gifts are 'inefficient' (e.g. givers buy goods different from those receivers would like), and gift-giving cannot be explained by the mere maximizing of one's self-interest. Stark (1995) argues that motives to give can range from pure altruism to pure self-interest. People care not only about their own material payoffs, but also about such things as fairness, equity and reciprocity (Fehr and Gächter, 2000; Thomas and Worrall, 2002). Social (non-selfish) preferences and context-dependent factors have to be taken into account when explaining the gift (Fehr and Smith, 1999; Henrich et al., 2004; Sobel, 2005). Gifts can be seen as economic signals and social symbols (Camerer, 1988). It is interesting to see that insights already firmly established within the fields of anthropology (such as the range of motives to give) and sociology (for example, the contextual dependency and symbolic signal-functions of the gift) are gradually being rediscovered by economists.

In the first, anti-utilitarian approach, reciprocity is opposed to the freedom of genuine gifts and real generosity. The economists' approach investigates the nature of the preferences of the actors involved in reciprocal exchange but fails to provide an analysis why the principle of reciprocity is so effective. Here I would like to attempt such an explanation. There are (at least) five elements in the principle of reciprocity that determine its effectiveness: (1) the survival value of gift-giving; (2) the recognition of the other implied in reciprocity; (3) the three obligations involved in it; (4) the morally binding character of reciprocity; and (5) the fact that reciprocity combines generosity and self-interest.

At the beginning of this article, I pointed at the survival value of gift-giving highlighted in the quotation by Lévi-Strauss. As Mary Douglas has stated in her foreword to the English translation of Mauss's essay, the theory of the gift is a theory of human solidarity. Human solidarity is deeply founded in the idea that it is in the collective interest of all to cooperate and exchange services and gifts with others (Komter, 2005). The survival value of gift-giving can most clearly be witnessed in studies of animal

behaviour. Primatologist Frans de Waal (1996) describes the workings of the principle of reciprocity in a community of chimpanzees. Chimps share and exchange food and groom one another on the basis of this principle: those who deviate from the rule by not grooming others or sharing food with them, will not be groomed or allowed to participate in food-sharing practices themselves. They are, so to speak, excommunicated, which is obviously disadvantageous for their survival chances. Evolutionary biologists such as Trivers (1971) and Dawkins (1976) have analysed the evolutionary advantages of so-called reciprocal altruism. Among animals as well as humans, altruistic behaviour serves the preservation of the members of the species because it is reciprocated by similar behaviour displayed by others. In the words of the psychologist Ronald Cohen: 'Because giving is such an adaptive feature for the maintenance of social life, it is so ubiquitous among human societies' (Cohen, 1978: 96).

A second aspect of the principle of reciprocity is its implicit assumption of the recognition of the other person as a potential ally. The social and cultural system on which archaic societies were based rested on the mutual acceptance of the other as partner in gift exchange. Recognition of the other as a human being proves to be an essential precondition for the coming into being of patterns of exchange. Without recognition of the person and his or her identity, no reciprocal exchange is possible. The significance of recognition of the other is echoed in the accounts of both classical and contemporary thinkers. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith developed some views on the mirroring of the imaginary viewpoints of the other in our own minds (Smith, 2002). These internalized others serve as the basis of our moral sensitivity. In the 20th century, similar ideas were elaborated upon by George Herbert Mead (1962). Similarly, in Hannah Arendt's view (1978) adoption of the plurality of other people's viewpoints in our own minds is the only way to transcend our own, interest-driven self and the limitations of our own judgement. Recognition of the humanity of self and other is tantamount to recognition of the interdependency of self and other, and interdependency is the basis for social bonds and human solidarity. For the recognition of humanity implies that other people's needs and their mutual dependency for the fulfilment of these needs are recognized. More recently, the German social philosopher Honneth (1992) analyses reciprocity as an issue of recognition. In order to be able to feel self-respect, people need the respect and regard of others. Also Habermas (1989) regards identity as the result of processes of mutual recognition, and reciprocal recognition as a basic assumption underlying social ties and solidarity. According to him, the basic principles of modern solidarity are not fundamentally different from the mutual expectations of reciprocity existing in premodern societies.

A third core aspect of the reciprocity principle is manifested in Mauss's famous statement about the three obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and the obligation to reciprocate. The principle of reciprocity is succinctly symbolized in this threefold obligation. As Mauss has pointed out, to refuse to give, to fail to invite, but also to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war. It is not the refusal of the object itself, but the rejection of the bond of alliance that is at stake here. As long as the recipient of a gift has not given back, the giver holds a certain power over the recipient. This power is equivalent to 'the spirit of the gift'. This spirit is believed to wish to return to the original giver. The thing given is invested with life and seeks to return to its place of origin. Things circulating in the hands of men and women are the constituents of the principle of reciprocity. As a consequence of these obligations, a perpetual cycle of exchanges is set up within and between generations. Social ties are created, sustained and strengthened by means of reciprocal gifts. These acts of gift exchange are at the basis of human solidarity.

A fourth aspect, implied in the third one, is the morally binding character of reciprocity. The three obligations are not enforced by some external power, but are internalized moral duties. Having received a gift causes a feeling of gratitude to arise, and gratitude can be considered the moral force that brings us to return the gift (Komter, 2005). In his article 'Faithfulness and Gratitude', Simmel argues that all contacts among human beings rest on the scheme of giving and returning the equivalence, and that a large part of these exchanges can be enforced by the law (Simmel, 1950). Gratitude is, according to Simmel, a supplement of the legal order. In relationships that lie outside the realm of the law – and this applies to the entire network of informal social ties between human beings – gratitude acts as the force that binds people to one another in an informal social contract. Without the moral obligation implied in gratitude, there would be no basis for trust and enduring social relationships.

Finally, one can wonder why the informal contract generated by reciprocity is so effective in creating the social cement of society. The answer lies in the sublime reconciliation of individual and social interests resulting from it. Reciprocity represents the elegant combination of self-interested concerns with the requirements of social life. As Marcel Mauss said: 'Material and moral life, and exchange, function . . . in a form that is both disinterested and obligatory' (Mauss, 1990: 33). According to Mauss, generosity and self-interest are linked in the act of gift-giving. The thought that altruism and egoism are not contradictory in gift-giving is highly illuminating. Gifts have the superb characteristic of being at the same time free and obligatory, altruistic and self-oriented. It is exactly this double-sidedness of the gift that makes it such a fortunate solution for the fragility and insecurity inherent in any newly developing social relationship.

## Conclusions

We have seen that there is an endless variation in the objects used for gifts, the occasions at which gifts are given and the rituals surrounding gift-giving, and that there are huge cultural differences in each of these aspects of the gift. Moreover, the spirit of the gift varies from disinterested generosity to the seeking of personal gain, with numerous shades and gradations in-between. Therefore, my first conclusion is that *the* gift does not exist, in the sense that there is not one general, unequivocal and non-ambiguous sense in which to understand the gift.

Second, there is nothing inherent in the gift that makes it morally good or bad. Gifts can help to maintain social ties between shrewd business partners lusting for money and power, or those who have outright criminal intentions, as well as between those striving to realize some noble aim or collective interest. Gifts can be altruistic and agonistic, beneficial as well as detrimental. The moral meaning of the gift depends on the nature of the social relationship within which it is given, and on the conscious and unconscious purposes and motives of those involved in that relationship.

A third conclusion, then, concerns the nature of social relationships and their connection to the spirit of the gift. I described four basic types of relationships between human beings, respectively based on community, authority, equality and market, and stated that each of these four relational models corresponds to a specific category of motives to give.

My fourth conclusion pertains to the principle of reciprocity underlying the gift. Five elements of reciprocity seem to determine its supreme efficacy: its survival value, the recognition of the other, the three obligations implied in it, the moral bond it creates and finally, the combination of altruistic and self-oriented concerns represented in it. The different assumptions about human nature underlying anti-utilitarianism and utilitarianism do not exclude each other. Human beings are both generous and calculative, sometimes even both at the same time. The gift reflects a multi-purpose symbolic 'utility' (Khalil, 1997) that transcends both utilitarianism and anti-utilitarianism.

Like the gift, reciprocity is not morally good in and of itself: reciprocal actions do not necessarily lead to a better society. Moreover, reciprocity not only means that gifts are followed by counter-gifts, but it can also take the negative form of revenge answered by counter-revenge: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth (Gouldner, 1973). As Frans de Waal (1996: 136) rightly observes: 'Reciprocity can exist without morality; there can be no morality without reciprocity.'

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